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The Season of Advent: A timeline of its historical development

Russell Hardiman

University of Notre Dame Australia, rhardiman@westnet.com.au

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The Season of Advent

A Timeline of its historical development

by Russell Hardiman

Introduction

In the monumental work edited by Max Johnson of Notre Dame USA dealing with the Liturgical Year, the Collegeville liturgist Martin Connell, himself a graduate of Notre Dame, published his research on the pre-Christmas Advent, before publishing a two volume study on the Liturgical Year in 2006. His twenty two pages had grown to a two volume work!

A major insight, Connell emphasises well, expresses how much the awareness of Advent depends on the theology of Christmas:

It seems quite likely that in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as today, the theology of a community's Advent was dependent to a great extent on its theology of Christmas. And, for better or for worse, the various theologies of Christmas in the fourth and fifth centuries were, no doubt, in part responsible for the variety and complexity of evidence for Advent in the same period¹.

Beyond the pragmatic benefit of background briefing about the origins and development of the season of Advent, this Timeline is meant to be a pastoral tool to help focus on the deepest meaning of Advent being a unique time for reflection on the many 'comings' of Christ in the past, in the present and in the future. In other liturgical theology phrases, we remember the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The point is not to go gaga over a cuddly baby but remember that, through his birth, death and resurrection, Christ has given us who are baptised the gift of life and life to the full (Jn:10,10). Through his spirit, with us to the end of the world, and through the sacraments of Christ's Church and especially the Eucharist, we have the means to guide our own life until we are brought to the ultimate encounter when we meet the Risen Lord or when He comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. That eschatological linking of past, present and future is in almost every prayer or text of Advent. Watch for this trilogy of past-present-future in the texts as the prime language of the Season of Advent.

Transitions from Judaism

C1

In the first Century the Christians, mostly of Jewish origins, followed the personal connection with the family Passover as if they, too, had passed over the Red Sea and entered into the Promised Land. What began on one specific day, like the style of Jewish Passover, carried on for several days embracing the first day of the week – Sunday the day of the Risen Lord.

None of the Gospels mention a fixed date for the Incarnation of the Messiah, yet the four Gospels account for the Nativity in different paradigms and contexts. In Luke there is no reference to season, nor month, nor day but he gives many insights into the historical concept of the rulers in the era of the Romans' control of the Holy Land. The date of 25th December comes from a certain

tradition yet not a strictly historical recurrence of some event but a celebration in sharing in the fruits of that event, now and forever.

The focus on the period over several days close to the Winter Solstice was very difficult to estimate when was the exact shortest day, so the arc of dates swung between December 21 and 23. This became the celebration of the new Son of Justice which became the adaptation Christians developed as the focus we now accept as Christmas.

As the winter solstice initiated a new year of life and the prophets saw the Messiah would be a new sun given from on high and now was the new day without sunset, for Christ is the light of the world.

In Pre-Christian times the feasts of Saturnalia began on December 17th and lasted seven days, during which time servants or slaves received gifts from their masters and were treated as if free, not virtual slaves, even to eating at table with their master. On December 25th the slaves went back to their normal rankings.

Christianity now a legal religion

C4

With the religious freedom enabled by the conversion to Christianity of the Emperor Constantine, when he had eliminated his major rival Maxentius in the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD, Constantine now could exercise his own vagaries by his decisions in lifting the restrictions previously aimed at an illegal religion by making his own laws to promote unity within his own empire.

In a different civil status Christians were now liberated from any form of slavery. Their liberator was now acknowledgeable as the Lord Jesus who encouraged his followers to share his memorial meal with the brethren.

In a calendar from 336-354AD Christians linked the Jewish custom of presuming for key figures the day of birth connected with the day of death.

Events with religious symbolism were already natural to Roman customs and were readily given new interpretations. In this background December 25th was not only a fixed date in the developing Christian calendar but also it was a deliberately chosen day because the date of birth and date of death were on the parallel dates, according to Jewish interpretation of the key dates of the major milestones of the prophets' life.

Advent in Northern Italy

C4

Gradually the legal status of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire era, under the convert Christian Emperor Constantine, meant centralised decisions re Sunday. The first day of the week was now a public holiday and the celebration of the birth of Christ was aligned with the eclipse of the pagan Roman feast of Sol Justitiae (the Sun of Justice) on the Winter Solstice [December 21st] to the rise of the observance of the Nativity of Christ. In Italy this eventually settled on

December 25th as the birth of the Son of God. Prior to the Christianisation of December 25th as the Nativity of Christ, his birth was celebrated on January 6th, and still is observed so in some Oriental and Orthodox traditions. The Oriental Churches did not count Saturday or Sunday as days of fasting. This led to periods of 40 days fasting, in fact, covering 7 weeks.

The first appearance of the Epiphany feast on January 6 is built on the baptism of Jesus. It is less sure historically, that Epiphany was the time for baptising of new members of the Christian Church.

In the era of St Ambrose of Milan (+397) and five or six other bishops, Northern Italy left witnesses to a season of preparation for the Nativity of Christ/Christmas in late 4th and early 5th centuries.

Filastrius, the Bishop of Brescia (+397) wrote a catalogue of heresies and heretics. He also wrote of four annual fasts; the first at (Christ's) birth, then the second at Easter, the third at Ascension, and the fourth at Pentecost.

The Bishop of Tours, (+397) is associated with the Advent period going as far back as November 11th, called "St Martin's Lent," as 40 days from November 11th to December 25th - Christmas day.

Advent in Spain

C4

The Council of Saragossa in 380 provides evidence of a three week - not counting Sundays - span for Advent celebrated in Spain linking the initiation connection with the January 6th feast of Epiphany. Canon IV of this Council specified that, during the 21 days from December 17th until January 6th no one should be absent from the Church or stay hidden at home.

This text seems at odds with the supposition of historians of the Liturgical Year that Christmas was celebrated in the Eastern Churches by the end of the fourth century. Apart from Rome, evidence does not endorse any belief that Christmas was received and celebrated in the West any earlier than in the East.

Advent in Tours

C5

Perpetuus died as Bishop of Tours in 490 and wrote of the span of Advent from November 11th until Christmas with three fasting days per week, similar to Lent.

Gregory, another Bishop of Tours writes in his *History of the Franks* of a preparation for Christmas. This was more ascetic in tone than connected with the initiation model but it was still forty days in length. It was called a Winter Lent, going from the feast day of Martin of Tours until the Nativity of Christ, making a period of seven weeks, like the Spring Lent.

Advent in Frankish-Germanic areas

C5

Bishop Chrysologus' episcopate in Ravenna, North Italy coincided largely with the era of the last two Christological councils, Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). In the euphoria beyond these major Councils the prayers (collects etc) of the Church in Ravenna reflected the clarification on the meaning and implications of the incarnation of Christ and - even more so - how this

mystery was held in balance with the divinity of Christ. This also can be gleaned from some of the Christmas Prayers written by the Bishop of Rome, Leo the Great (440-461). Those prayers about the meaning of the duality of divine and human is graphically expressed by the words of Pope Leo's prayer about the water and wine mix, being the hope and trust for us that we "share the divinity of him who humbled himself to share in our humanity". What is now proclaimed softly (*sotto voce*) at every Mass was publicly proclaimed by Pope Leo at Christmas in the fifth century

C6

A Council in 582, in the Frankish city of Maçon ordered the time between the feast of St Martin and Christmas, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were fast days and in that time frame the liturgy was celebrated as in Lent, with simplified chant and ritual to make the fullness of ritual for Christmas have its impact.

Advent in Ravenna

In the era of the Irish missionaries (like Columbanus) the Irish emphasised the coming of the Lord in judgement and the need of penance to prepare for that judgement. This led to the penitential spirit associated with Advent.

Advent in Aquileia

C7

Gospel lists from Aquileia, overrun by barbarian invasions after the first attack up the River Tiber on Rome presaged the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, leaving Constantinople to become the dominant city in the Eastern Roman Empire.

An *evangelarium* or list of selected Gospel readings at Masses, gives testimony to four Sundays in Advent in Rome in the early C7. Even earlier the list may have covered five Sundays, again connected with the priority of January 6th at Epiphany which was a remnant of a period of preparation for initiation, before Easter became the prime time.

The Gospel texts give witness to the initiation tradition built around January 6th and the preparation period now known as Advent had more of a baptismal catechesis input than being only the Second Coming of Christ in judgment. Eventually Advent was interpreted in historical narratives, which included the coming of John the Baptist as well as the birth of Jesus, as other Gospel texts emphasise the historic events around the Nativity of Jesus.

From the early Middle Ages there are still extant Gospel lists which indicate readings from John: the woman at the well (Jn: 4), the man born blind (Jn: 9) and the raising of Lazarus (Jn: 11). This same structure of texts is used today as the scrutiny Sundays during Lent, where parishes celebrate the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) at Easter.

The original 6 weeks of Advent are still followed by the Ambrosian Rite in Milan.²

Roman advent as model

C6

In the papacy of Gregory the Great (590-604) we can perceive the skeleton of an ecclesiastical structure, whereby the Church of Rome was convinced of its

imperial role in the West, separate from the Eastern Church of Constantinople which eventually became the Byzantine tradition that unified the Eastern peoples. The Roman practice, their customs and traditional rituals now became an exportable heritage to share with the broader churches in the European new kingdoms

Rogation days, Ember days C6

In the time before the Gregorian pattern became exportable elsewhere, the early forms of liturgical manuscripts witness to the preparation period before Nativity consisted of the five Sundays with a blank Sunday before Christmas. It served to fit the pattern of ferial days or Ember Days celebrations being close to the Roman Empire's way of special rituals for the four seasons of the solar year. These Roman customs of the Ember Days were inculturated or christened by becoming the Rogation Days which further evolved to periods of special prayer. The prayer was consistent with the agricultural cycles and activities and eventually became the fixed times when the administration for levels of the sacrament of Holy Orders. An offshoot of this regular cycle was that ordinations to major orders and the minor orders were on these special Ferial Ember Days, such as ordinations to the priesthood were in March, June, September or December in the third or fourth week.

The five Sundays of Advent and the vacant Sunday made up the Advent cycle of six Sundays. Later in his papacy Gregory the Great reduced the 6 week Advent preparation back to four Sundays.

The earliest forms of Roman exportable liturgical models were the sixth century *Gregorian Sacramentary* and the *Capitulary of Wurzburg*.

Fear of the day of judgement C7

There is however another strand in the liturgy of Advent that from the early Middle Ages played a significant part in it. The Second Coming was thought of almost exclusively in the terms of the Last Judgement which would be a time of terror when the whole human race would be gathered together and arraigned before God... in the seventh century when western civilisation seemed to be in an advanced state of collapse with the takeover of the Lombard tribes forming Lombardia in Central Italy.³

C7-8

A century after Gregory the Great there was a period in which the Advent Sundays were shortened further from 4 weeks to 3 weeks by utilising only the Sundays in December before the December 25th Christmas feast day. A further redistribution was the three Sundays in December being added to, with one Sunday falling in November between days 27-30 (as will happen in 2009 with the first Sunday of Advent being November 29).

Roman Rite C9

In the era of Charlemagne, he used the unifying capacity of Catholic rituals as the glue to keep solid the practices of his many Frankish tribes. In this context the November 11 feast of St Martin grew more celebratory in style; similar to Lent, as how excesses of Mardi Gras could precede Ash Wednesday. From this missionary vision Advent was perceived as a time for asceticism and fasting. This lasted over a thousand years until it was finally codified in the first Code of Canon Law of 1917. Over that millennial span the ascetic dimensions of fasting associated with baptism were lost and rarely is connected with baptism in contemporary times.

C9-10

As the Roman liturgical books influenced the pattern of Advent so, too, that pattern continued in pure forms, or inculturated forms, in Northern European churches even after the city of Rome declined in power.

In the development of the liturgical books, one of great functional need and use was the *Antiphonal* which provided the listing for all the antiphons sung to accompany specific psalms. The oldest extant copy is the *Liber Responsorialis* of Gregory the Great.

C10

On the cusp of the millennium, in Verona, Rutherius the Bishop (+974) wrote to his priests about the season of Advent. He encouraged the priests of his diocese of Verona:

Keep the forty days equally, except for Sundays. For if you fast on one day and are hungover the next, you observe not forty days, but only twenty.⁴

The ascetical dimension went even further. In the four weeks before Christmas Christians were still to be encouraged to refrain from flesh, dead or alive. In an era as an ascetical season when celibacy had not yet been consistently lived out fully, Rutherius urged:

During Advent unless it is a feast, abstain from meat-eating and intercourse for four weeks.⁵

These traditions also dissuaded the celebration of weddings during the ascetical times of Advent and Lent, which led to the notion of Easter brides, who would be blessed in their marriage for their faithfulness in waiting.

C11-12

The incredible growing rates of the second wave of the monastic Rule in the Western Church, after the Benedictine origins in the fifth century, now became an even greater expansion. The Cistercians, as a stricter observance of the Benedictine Rule, developed hundreds of monasteries in Northern Europe continuing the Benedictine motto of *ora et labora* (Prayer and work) with renewed interest in the monastic life and particularly the many roles of the Divine Office or, today, the Liturgy of the Hours.⁶

The great schism of 1054

C11

While the 40 day paradigm for Advent and Lent did not continue in the Latin Rite, it continued in Orthodox churches. In this model, the Christmas fast did not begin on November 11th on the feast of St Martin of Tours, a Roman Rite Saint. In the Eastern Orthodox Calendar the fast can be called 'St Phillip's fast', for the feast of the Eastern Advent is hinged to Phillip's feast day on November 14th.

In the Orthodox tradition the anticipation is more focused on the Wise Men of the East at Epiphany (January 6th) and that is the Orthodox day of Christ's birth while the Christmas in the West is on December 25th.

O Antiphons

C4

The Council of Saragossa in Spain in 380 created an ascetic element beyond the initiation perspective leading to baptism celebrated on January 6th at the feast of Epiphany. This 3 week period, as ordered in the 4th canon of this Council, created a 21 days consecutive sequence from December 17th until Epiphany. This time frame had the title the "Golden Span" and it popularly used the famous seven O Antiphons as the basis for a pre-Christmas novena leading to Christmas.

C 9

Amalarius of Metz (+C850) described the O Antiphons as used with the evening prayer canticle, the *Magnificat* at Vespers.

C12

By the twelfth century Roman texts provide testimony that the O Antiphons were also sung as the Morning Prayer Canticle, the *Benedictus*, used at Lauds, or at Morning Prayer. The traditional Advent song, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, is a paraphrase of the O Antiphons.

C13

At the Council of Salzburg in 1281, when Martin IV was Pope, the regulations about fasting emphasised that they were to be observed by all religious people from the November 11th feast of St Martin until Christmas.

C13

While the four week Advent season became the Roman practice from the early Middle Ages, things still varied when previous traditions still prevailed. High into the Middle Ages, Gallican churches of the 13th Century still adhered to the practice of a 40 day Advent with varieties of ascetic custom being different from one place to another.

Christmas Crib

C13

In 1224 a new phenomenon began by the radical reformer of Assisi, Francis, the founder of a new mendicant style of monks moving around to where the people were, rather than living in big remote monasteries. Francis painted the scenario of the Bethlehem stable on the wall of his cell at Greccio in Umbria. The following year he built a model in the local

church so he could regain the privacy of his cell when so many wished to visit the scene of the birth of Jesus.

The ascetical tone of Advent took on a stronger form about the doomsday perception of the second coming of the Christ and the last judgement. A Franciscan, Thomas of Celano (+1255) a friend and biographer of St Francis, wrote the classic hymn *Dies Irae, Dies Illa* which was used on the first Sunday of Advent from the mid thirteenth century and then came to be used ultra frequently, as the Sequence for a Requiem Mass for the Dead.⁷

Post reformation era

C16-17

After the reformations, the pre Trent practices were carried forward in the Trent-inspired revision of liturgical texts which, over half a century, composed the Roman Rite in a library of Volumes. In addition, a copout clause empowered any diocese, monastery, or religious order whose liturgical books were over 200 years old to be able to continue to use them even after the publication of the Roman Rite books. This was based on the principle that, being older than the reformers' attempts, they would still be valid.

Meanwhile the branches of Lutheran and Anglican leadership did not start with a *tabula rasa* (empty table). All churches continued to use some of the pre-Reformation hymnody and most generated a huge new repertoire of polyphonic music in the vernacular languages as well as some of the Latin melodies even with vernacular translations.

Some of the elements of Advent carried forward into new epochs included the O Antiphons; the omission of the Gloria during the Advent Sunday Eucharist; the wearing of penitential vestments, resulting in different shades of purple/violet to separate the penitential spirit of Lent from the different tone of Advent e.g. by using the royal blue shade from English customs.

The O Antiphons are a more specific paraphrase of some of the Hebrew Scriptures with their significant metaphors, titles, Old Testament names and what served as a Christian title or reference, especially in the Liturgy of the Hours as the antiphons for the *Magnificat* at Vespers in honour of Mary's role in her son's mission.

Beyond the standard Vespers' use in music, contemporary parish artists and graphics experts have been able to come up with artistic representations to explain and illustrate the O Antiphons. The Old Testament texts were expressed in images in a variety of media. This opened up a broad scenario that could offer a potentially unlimited number of reflection points to enter into the mystery of these word images.

The growth in popularity and use of the O Antiphons in both Catholic and Protestant traditions show how biblical literacy can be a harmonious pathway that may yet overcome some of the dogmatic differences that are still a cacophony after five centuries of separation.

C18-19

In the era of steamship emigration from the European countries' rural valleys and villages as well as the cities and towns, there were often substantial bodies of religious groups accompanied by clergy and religious from their ethnic or religious grouping, who left their

homeland. The common denominator was seeking a new life in a new world, and, for many, the freedom to practise their style of religion. This led to the outcome in which many of the religious practices and customs from the mother countries were now to be part of religious integration in the receiving communities. The most obvious illustration of this movement was the introduction of the Advent Wreath from the Northern European areas, into the new world.

Contemporary times

C20

The Pius XII Reform of Holy Week and the Easter Vigil, began as a trial in 1951 and became standard with new texts for Holy Week in 1956. This aroused an awareness of the potential for change which was continued by the Pian Committee for Liturgical Change.⁸

Pope John XXIII endorsed the plans of Pius XII's proposed direction with his announcement of an Ecumenical Council, in January 1959. The Council began October 11th, 1962 as the 2nd Vatican Council.

The first fruits of the 2nd Vatican Council were the *Constitution on the Liturgy* proclaimed on December 4th, 1963. As regards the Liturgical Year it proclaims

Within the cycle of a year, moreover, the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation and birth until his ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the Lord's return.

Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present in every age that the faithful may lay hold on them and be filled with saving grace. (SC 102)

Pope Paul VI, on 14th February 1969, issued the *Motu Proprio Mysterii Paschalis* giving his approval of the document generally called the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*.

The Sacred Congregation Rites (*Consilium*) proclaimed the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*:

Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered; as a season when the remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's second coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation (N. 39).

Pope John Paul II, on September 14th, 1984, approved and ordered the publication of the new *Ceremonial of Bishops* which further describes the connection between Advent and Christmas in similar terms (CB. 235):

The season of Advent, the preparation for this commemoration [of the Nativity] has a twofold character: it is a time to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming is remembered; it is a time when the remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming in the

last days. In this way Advent is a period of devout and joyful expectation.

Advent Wreath

The post Vatican II Liturgical books were structured as revisions of the pattern of the Roman Rite. This meant that where the *Roman Ritual* covered baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals and anointing of the sick in a single pocket sized volume – now – all of the sacramental occasions have a separate large volume. One specific volume is titled *The Roman Ritual Revised by the Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope John Paul II Book of Blessings*, which was then published by Episcopal Conferences in the various languages.

The interesting detail is that in Chapter 47 of this Book of Blessings there is actually an order for the Blessing of the Advent Wreath, covering several situations and variations. This is the first time that the Advent Wreath has ever had a mention in any version of the Roman Ritual. Does this now mean that the Advent Wreath is a recognised liturgical ceremony or ritual of the Roman Rite?⁹

A further Vatican reference to the widespread use of the Advent Wreath came in the 2002 *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* §98:

Placing four candles on green fronds has become a symbol of Advent in many Christian homes, especially in the Germanic countries and in North America. [and in the Southern Hemisphere in the last 30 years.]

*The Advent wreath, with the progressive lighting of its four candles, Sunday after Sunday, until the Solemnity of Christmas, is a recollection of the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ's coming and a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf Mt 3,20; Lk 1, 78).*¹⁰

Further reading

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Endnotes

¹ Martin J. Connell "The Origins and Evolution of Advent in the West" in Maxwell E Johnson (2000) *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press: A Pueblo Book, pp 349-371 here p. 349.

² Richard M. Nardone (1991) *The Story of the Christian Year*. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, p. 50.

³ J. D. Crichton (1990) *The Coming of the Lord*. Rattlesden, Bury St Edmunds: Kevin Mayhew, p. 9-10.

⁴ Martin J. Connell (2006) *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*. Volume 1 On God and Time, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas. London/ New York: Continuum, p.69.

⁵ *ibid*, p. 69.

⁶ Text: Jean-Francois Leroux-Dhuys, Photography: Henri Gaud (1998) *Cistercian Abbeys: History and Architecture*. Cologne: Könemann.

⁷ Joseph Connelly (1957) *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy*. London: Longman's, Green and Co, pp252-257.

⁸ *Ordo Hebdomadae Sanctae Instauratus*. Editio Typica. Typis Polyglotis Vaticanis MCMLVI. General Decree of the Congregation of Rites, 16th November 1965.

⁹ Prepared by International Commission on English in the Liturgy a Joint Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conferences (1989) *The Roman Ritual Revised by the Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope John Paul II Book of Blessings*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co, pp647-657.

¹⁰ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (2002) *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*. Sydney: St Pauls, p81.